



Sustainable Gardening

A sustainable garden works in harmony with nature. The main techniques that can improve the health of your garden and minimize any negative impact on the environment include:

Organic Gardening

Growing food without the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides and inorganic fertilizers that pollute our soil and water. It relies on the use of beneficial insects, diversity of plants, and the use of compost to feed the soil instead of plants.

Native Plants and Trees

By matching plant species to your particular area you will have plants and trees that take less care and energy and will be healthier than exotic species. Another benefit is that native birds, insects, and other wildlife have evolved with native plant species and are able to use the fruits, nectars and habitat that these plants and trees provide. In addition; native plants are more adaptable to the soil of the same area.

Double Digging and Compost

Double digging helps the soil hold more water, improves aeration and places organic material at a depth that enables plant roots to adequately extend. Double digging and adding compost will build humus and soil fertility. Composting is a method of returning organic waste back into a nutrient rich soil amendment. Ultimately, compost improves plant health by supplying nutrients to the soil. All you need to start is a shallow composter located in a sunny spot to speed up the process.

Drip Irrigation

By delivering water directly to the plant's root, little is lost to evaporation or runoff so this technique is very water efficient. Soil moisture remains constant, and air is always available.

Mulch

Mulch protects the soil by helping it retain moisture, suppresses weeds and insulates plants from extreme temperatures. It is highly recommended to use compost as mulch. Turning compost to the soil next season will supply it with nutrients.

Spring Gardening Tips

Start spring cleanup of the lawn when the grass is no longer sopping wet and planting beds stop being a sea of mud. Cut back the previous season's dead plant material. Clean up old perennial foliage from last season (trimmings can go into the compost). Cut back ornamental grasses. Remove winter protection of mounded earth from roses.

Remove tree guards or burlap winter protection from any young trees or shrubs. Try not to leave tree guards in place over the summer. They keep rabbits and mice from nibbling on tender bark over the winter, but trees don't need them in summer. They don't allow enough air movement around the base of the trunk and that can promote rot of the bark.

Transplant any existing shrubs you want to move before they begin to leaf out. Replant any perennials that the frost has heaved out of the ground as soon as you can. Plant new trees and shrubs.

Apply dormant oil spray to fruit trees, magnolias, crabapples and shrubs such as euonymus to control scale insects and other overwintering pests. Use this organic pest control method when the buds are swelling but the leaves haven't opened yet. Apply when temperatures are above 40 degrees F (4 degrees C).

Maintain edges. Grass growth is vigorous in the early spring garden, so edge your flower beds with a sharp trench between them and the grass to keep it in bounds. Repeat this job a couple of times through the season or installing permanent edging goes a long way towards having a lower maintenance flower garden.

Prune woody plants, including evergreens or deciduous hedges. Spring-flowering should be pruned right after their blossoms fade. Prune rose bushes before they start to leaf out. To encourage thick, compact growth on pines and other needled evergreens, pinch the new candles (the new growth on evergreens). Remove half of the new growth.

Start lawn care in spring by keeping up with the mowing. Set your mower to a height of about three inches, and try not to remove more than one-third of the blades at one cutting. Sharp blades cut better and leave your lawn grass healthier. Aerate your lawn, top dress it, re-seed and fertilize.

Water newly planted trees and shrubs, ground cover plants and perennials if there isn't enough rain. Most plants need an inch of moisture per week.

Mulch your flowerbeds and under shrubs to retain moisture and keep weeds down.

Keep on top of the weeds. Getting on top of the weeding now means a lot less work later before they set seeds. Weeds start growing vigorously early, so when you spot them, go to it because they are easier to pull out while their roots are still shallow in early spring.

Maintain your perennial garden by continuing to plant and transplant perennials. Divide perennials and ornamental grasses that need it.

Note any mid-spring garden gaps that could be filled with spring bulbs for next year and buy new plants to fill any holes now. Plant frost-tender annuals and dahlias and summer-flowering bulbs such as gladioli after the last frost date.

Label any new plants so you'll remember what they are or draw a map of your garden.

Stake perennials such as delphiniums and peonies before they've grown too tall (bamboo sticks and string do a better job than most commercial supports).

Apply fertilizer if needed. Consider organic fertilizers. When it's dry enough, you can start to dig beds and add compost or manure in preparation for planting.

Dividing Perennial Plants

Many perennial plants grow in a clump. After several seasons of growing, these perennial plants will begin to die out in the center and look more like a ring than a clump. To keep the plants vigorous and blooming, a technique known as 'Division' is performed. Dividing perennial plants gives you healthier, longer lived plants and the bonus of more plants.

Keep an eye out for clumps that have grown 2-3 times their size within 2-5 years. Any overgrown clump or any clump that has simply exceeded the space allotted is a candidate for division.

Spring is usually the best time for division, since the plants are actively growing and their leaves are not so developed that the root system can't take a little disturbance and still feed the top of the plant. However, some plants like peonies, prefer to be divided in the early fall.

In most cases, it is easiest to divide a perennial plant by digging and lifting the entire plant. Use a shovel or flat edged spade and slice completely around the outer perimeter of the plant, a few inches away from the foliage. The idea is to dig as much of the root ball as possible. If you have an extremely large plant, you may have to divide it several times before you have new plants of an appropriate size.

Some plants, like geraniums and Jacob's ladder, are simply quick spreaders and their root systems are quite easy to dig a separate. In this case you do not need to lift the entire plant.

Tips for dividing your perennials:

- Treat them like new seedlings
- Avoid dividing during the hottest part of the day
- Roots will quickly dry if exposed to hot sun or breeze for long time
- Keep them well watered until new growth appears
- Provide some shade if they appear to be wilting during the afternoon

Lawn Mowing

For Ontario, the cool season grasses like Kentucky Blue Grass, Fescue, and Rye should be mowed as high as possible. The best is around 2 to 3 inches (5 to 7.6 cm) and no higher. If you cut any taller than that, the grass can flop over, and if you cut it too short, the grass is more susceptible to weeds, it dries out faster, and overall does poorly.

Mowing at this height:

- Encourages a dense, thriving turf that naturally blocks weeds
- Increases leaf area to sustain photosynthesis rates necessary to maintain good plant vigor
- Develops deeper, stronger root systems

The lawn should be mowed frequently enough so that no more than 1/3 of the leaf blade length is removed during any one mowing. Proper mowing frequency is a key to successful implementation of the "Don't Bag It" clipping return program.

Turfgrass should be mowed when it is dry. Wet grass is more difficult to cut and has a tendency to clog under rotary mowers. Contrary to popular belief, turfgrass clippings do not contribute to thatch accumulation if proper mowing practices are followed. Turfgrass clippings contain measurable amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium that reduce fertilizers required to maintain healthy lawn.

Tip:

Having the mower serviced prior to the heavy spring mowing period will help ensure routine, maintenance-free mowing. Mower blades should be sharpened each spring and as needed during the season. A dull mower blade frays the ends of blades and results in brown tips which are unsightly and indicate damaged turfgrass.

Fall Tips

Watering: One important job in the early fall garden is to continue to water your plants, especially your evergreens, trees and shrubs if it is not raining enough (unlikely for this year). Going into the winter well hydrated will help keep your plants thriving.

Create a new, easy no-dig flower bed. Try this method if you want to plant in the following spring:

1. Cut existing grass at your mower's lowest setting.
2. To kill grass, spread a layer of newspaper about 12 sheets thick.
3. Spread 12 inches of organic matter (well-fermented manure, compost, or triple mix) over the layers of newspaper. Rake and mound.
4. If doing this job in fall, let mound settle until spring. Worms and soil micro-organisms will mix and enrich the soil.

Make notes about garden changes or plants that you might want to move in the spring.

Lawn care:

1. Aerate your lawn. The holes allow oxygen, fertilizers and water better access to roots. Aeration will reduce water run off and soil compaction and will improve root growth.
2. Reseed any dead or thin spots. This is the best time of the year to lay sod, overseed or start a lawn from seed because temperatures are cooler and rain tends to be more plentiful than in the hot summer months.

Container plantings: Once they're past their prime, empty containers of annuals and store frost-sensitive containers in the basement or the garage.

Perennials: Don't be in a great rush to cut back all your perennials early. Seed heads and foliage that's coloring up can be beautiful, and the seeds are food for migrating birds. Cut back plants that are diseased and allow healthy plants to self-seed freely.

If you have too little color in the garden now, visit your local garden center for some ideas on late-season flowers to add, and take an advantage of end of season sales.

Divide overgrown perennials - this is the ideal time to divide and transplant peonies, day lilies, and irises.

Annuals: Pull or dig out summer annuals that are past their prime, and plant mums and colorful kale for fall interest.

Dig up summer bulbs: After the first frost, dig up dahlias, cannas, gladioli, and similar non-hardy summer bulbs for winter storage. Dig bulbs or tubers up after frost has blackened foliage. Carefully remove as much soil as you can off the bulbs. Leave bulbs or tubers exposed to air in a frost-free place for a couple of weeks. Store in dry peat in paper bags or cardboard boxes in a cool, frost free place at 40 to 50°F (5-10°C).

Spring bulbs: Buy spring-flowering bulbs while they're in plentiful supply, but don't plant them too early. You can plant bulbs up to the time the ground freezes. If you plan carefully, the show of bulbs can last from late winter until June. The beauty of spring-flowering bulbs is their incredible variety, in size and shape, color and bloom time.

In fall when the garden is still full of foliage from summer's perennials, it's hard to recall how the beds can look in early spring. So try to plant abundantly so your spring show has a bigger impact.

The big three for spring are tulips, daffodils and hyacinths. There are many lovely, easy-to-grow, lesser-known bulbs such as crocus, muscari, ornamental onions or alliums and fritillaria.